

## CRITICAL COMMUNITY PSYCHOLOGY: THE PERCEPTIONS OF UK UNDERGRADUATE PSYCHOLOGY STUDENTS

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*Psychology undergraduates represent the future workforce of the applied psychology professions. As such, this study explores UK psychology undergraduates' views of critical community psychology and its relevance to applied psychology related to well-being and mental health as they understand it. In this mixed methods study, 239 participants rated 43 statements about critical community psychology. Participants also provided their qualitative views on: i. the statements, ii. on critical community psychology generally, and iii. on its relationship to well-being and mental health. Quantitatively, each of the four factors (i. Reflective practice, ii. Acknowledging and understanding, iii. Core socio-political ideas, and iv. Radical socio-political ideas), were significantly and positively related to each other. On average, all four factors were seen as relevant to the future of applied psychology related to well-being and mental health by participants. However, significant differences were found between the factors, some with medium and large effect sizes. Qualitatively, many provided a general positive endorsement of the relevance of critical community psychology and of broader systemic factors influencing applied work. Participants asked for more information on this area to be provided both within their degree and for the general public. Other comments suggested both: applied work should include both micro and macro elements, and that applied work should remain focused on the individual. Finally, a smaller number of comments suggested that the statements were not relevant to: i. individual mental health, ii. to psychology, and even iii. not relevant as ideas. The discussion brings together the quantitative and qualitative data relating it back to the literature. It highlights the wider challenges of bringing critical community psychology to bear on applied psychology work in the UK, beyond reflective practice.*

**Keywords:** community psychology, critical community psychology, undergraduates, mixed methods, mental health, well-being

### 1. Introduction

This study explores UK psychology undergraduates' views of the concepts, values, and ideas of critical community psychology and their relevance to applied psychology related to well-being and mental health (e.g., clinical and counselling psychology) as participants understand it. With undergraduates representing a direct pathway to the eventual future workforce of the applied psychology professions in the UK their thoughts and views seem important. The introduction, below, will provide a brief synopsis of the historical development of the discipline of community psychology, before focusing more on the UK context where, some argue, the development of community and critical community psychology has been slow. It will then highlight the continuing need for such approaches before introducing this study.

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As readers of this journal will know, in the UK, USA and elsewhere in the world, community psychologies often developed, in part, in response to the focus of clinical psychology on the individual (Fondacaro & Weinberg, 2002; Reich et al., 2017). In the US context, the 1965 Swampscott Conference marked a change in direction. Here the US founders of community psychology discussed how a reoriented psychology might act as better agents of social change (Gokani & Walsh, 2017). Decades later, some argued that community psychology's commitment to social change had dissipated. In part these criticisms led to the development of a more critical community psychology (Angelique & Kyle, 2002; Gokani & Walsh, 2017; Kagan et al., 2011, 2019; Montero, 2011). Evans et al. (2017) reminds their readers how critical community psychology also grew from within the wider critical psychology movement and provide an overview of these developments around the globe (p.110-111). The broader influence of critical currents in Latin America generally and Liberation psychology specifically must also be noted in the development of critical community psychology (see Martín-Baró, 1996; Montero, 2009; Montero et al., 2017).

In the UK, it has been argued that the development of community and critical community psychology has been slower than elsewhere in the world (Burton & Kagan, 2003). Burton et al. (2007) noted that in the UK, community psychology is 'relatively underdeveloped' (p. 220) and even a 'minority pursuit' (p. 232). Only one Masters programme solely focuses on community psychology (the MSc in Community Psychology at the University of Brighton) and there are no pathways for a professional qualification in community psychology itself. Most psychologists working in well-being and mental health are employed as clinical or counselling psychologists in the National Health Service (NHS). The accreditation standards for UK doctoral courses in clinical psychology, set by the British Psychology Society (BPS) mention community psychology just once, saying that clinical trainees must be taught about the "values related to an ethos of critical community psychology" (2019a, p.24).

At the same time, the need for community and critical community psychology is arguably greater than ever before. In the UK, poverty and social inequality remain associated with a higher risk of common mental health issues (McManus et al., 2016), with individuals living in deprived areas showing lower recovery rates from psychological interventions compared to those living in more affluent areas (House of Commons Library; Baker, 2021). The current benefits system (universal credit) appears to be impacting people's mental health, with some claimants at risk of suicide (Cheetham et al., 2019). And recently the UN Poverty Envoy claimed that it seems "patently unjust and contrary to British values that so many people are living in poverty" (Alston, 2018, p.1.). This fits with patterns described in reviews of the existing literature which provide further evidence of the links between poverty, income inequality and psychological distress both in high income countries such as the UK (Patel et al., 2018) and around the world (Lund et al., 2010; Patel et al., 2018).

Against backdrops such as this community and critical community psychology ideas could or should arguably thrive. And yet, even defining community and critical community psychology is not a simple task (Fryer & Laing, 2008; Kagan et al., 2011, 2019). That said, definitions and discussions of the field do exist (Burton, 2004; Burton et al., 2007; Kagan et al., 2011, 2019). In one other example, Thompson (2007), followed a two stage Delphi methodology that first asked global experts in critical community psychology to generate statements that described its concepts, values and ideas. Then in stage two, the statements were rated quantitatively and commented on qualitatively by 354 trainee clinical psychologists in the UK.

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Thompson (2007) analysed the results of the trainees' ratings of the 43 statements using exploratory factor analysis. It resulted in four factors: i. Reflective practice, ii. Acknowledging and understanding, iii. Core socio-political ideas, and iv. Radical socio-political ideas. The mean rating trainees gave to items in these factors suggested that they, on average, found the ideas relevant to the future of clinical psychology as they saw it. The lowest average rating was given to statements related to Radical socio-political ideas, but the mean item ratings still suggested that participants thought these ideas were relevant. Follow up qualitative analysis again saw positive endorsement from the trainees but added nuance about how and whether critical community psychology ideas could be embodied within clinical practice within the NHS and the potential difficulty of mixing the personal, professional and political (Thompson, 2007).

In the USA, Albee (1990, 1998) recommended that undergraduate psychology courses should teach students about social justice and injustice, and the impacts on behaviour. In the UK, over the years, similar suggestions have been made (e.g., Trapp et al., 2011). But community and critical community psychology is not currently highlighted as core material by the BPS. Indeed, even the much larger subject area of mental health forms just one part of the 'individual differences' subsection of the curriculum, which also includes: personality, psychometrics and intelligence (BPS, 2019b, p.11). The somewhat vague and rather catch all phrase used in both the BPS guidelines and the Quality Assurance Agency for UK Higher Education subject benchmark statement for psychology is simply: "mental health (including social, biological and cognitive processes"; QAA, 2019, p.5).

Given the current situation and following Thompson (2007), it seems potentially useful to try to understand how undergraduates, our future applied psychologists, view the field of critical community psychology. Therefore, the present study will explore UK psychology undergraduates' views of critical community psychology and their interpretation of its relevance to the future of applied psychology related to well-being and mental health as they understand it.

## **2. Methods**

Following Thompson (2007), this study employed an online mixed methods design to explore UK psychology undergraduates' views on the concepts, values and ideas of critical community psychology. It used an explanatory sequential mixed methods design (Quant → Qual; Tembo, 2014). Here, quantitative data collection happens first with qualitative data providing insights into those results (Creamer, 2018). The integration of the results will take place within the discussion (i.e., independent strands; Tembo, 2014).

### **2.1 Materials and procedure**

Data was collected through an online questionnaire, hosted on Qualtrics. The quantitative part of the research asked participants to rate the 43 statements from Thompson (2007) which represent one encapsulation of the concepts, values and ideas of critical community psychology. For this study, the prompt to the statements asked: "*In your view, how relevant is each of the statements below to the future of applied psychology related to well-being and mental health (e.g., clinical and counselling psychology) as you understand it?*". Participants rated each item on a 5-point Likert type scale (1=very relevant, 3=neither relevant nor irrelevant, 5= very irrelevant).

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Thompson (2007) performed an exploratory factor analysis on the 43 items resulting in four factors: Reflective practice, Acknowledging and understanding, Core socio-political ideas and Radical socio-political ideas (see appendix 1). Specifically:

Reflective practice, contains 10 items, and represents some ideas shared by both therapeutic psychologists (e.g., clinical and counselling) and those interested in critical community psychology. Items include: "Working at the micro or personal level (i.e., with individuals)" and "Recognising that professionals are not the only people who hold expertise". Cronbach alpha levels were calculated for all factors. For Reflective practice the alpha level was  $\alpha=.81$  (very good [range .80 - .90] according to DeVellis, 2012, p.109).

Acknowledging and understanding, contains 6 items, all based around the statement "Acknowledging and understanding the impact of "X" factors on suffering. "X" included areas such as economic, political and environmental factors. Cronbach alpha levels for these items was  $\alpha=.82$ .

Core socio-political ideas, contains 7 items, and represents central ideas within community psychology. For example: "Working with the poor, marginalised, oppressed and disadvantaged" and also: "Acknowledging that psychology's current position perpetuates social injustice". Cronbach alpha levels for factor was  $\alpha=.81$ .

Finally, Radical socio-political ideas, also contains 7 items, and overall, the items are more radical and critical than previous factors. Here, example items refer to "Challenging the purpose and prevalence of capitalism in contemporary society" and "Aiding 'conscientization'. This is where the oppressed develop an awareness and understanding of the nature of their oppressing circumstances". Cronbach alpha levels for factor was also  $\alpha=.81$ .

The remaining 13 items were not strongly associated with any single factor or loaded on multiple factors in the original study. In this study, the order of the 43 statements was randomised once and then presented to participants in this set order (see appendix 1).

For the qualitative part of the study, after rating the statements, participants replied in a single essay text box to the open-ended qualitative question: "*The confines of a 5-point Likert-type scale may have made it difficult for you to express your views towards some of the statements describing critical community psychology either individually or generally. Please use the space below to express any additional views you have on: 1. The statements (feel free to click the back button below to remind yourself of the statements), 2. On critical community psychology, as you now understand it, in general, 3. Or on its relationship to well-being and mental health (e.g. clinical psychology, counselling psychology and other related areas).*"

Prior to the main questionnaire, participants read an information sheet, provided consent to take part and completed some simple demographic information. The study was granted ethical approval by the psychology ethics board at the host institution.

## **2.2. Participants**

UK psychology undergraduates (both single honours and major/minor honours) were recruited. Snowball sampling encouraged participants to pass the questionnaire onto others studying psychology elsewhere in the UK. At the host institution, the study was advertised on the subject participant pool among other staff and student research studies. The study was also listed on websites and social media forums recruiting UK psychology students. For example, these included, both Facebook generally (sharing with the contacts

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of individuals) and the Dissertation Survey Exchange (<https://www.facebook.com/groups/ShareYourSurvey/>) where individuals complete each other's surveys. Those participants who took part at the host institution only were offered course credit for participation.

In total, the questionnaire received 291 responses. On 52 occasions, none of the 43 statements were rated, so these entries were discarded, leaving 239. Of these, just one participant had a single item of missing data from the quantitative part of the questionnaire. This was replaced using hot deck imputation (Andridge & Little, 2010).

Of the 239 participants who completed the study, 77% were female ( $N=184$ ), 23% male ( $N=54$ ) and 1 identified as non-binary. Participants had an age range of 18-45 ( $M=21$ ,  $SD=3.46$ ). Regarding ethnicity: White (85%), Asian (9%), Mixed (5%), and Black (1%). In terms of area of the world they normally live, 95% of participants were permanent residents of the UK, with 5% international students. In terms of year of study, 53% of participants were in first year, 35% in second year, 10% in third year, and 3% enrolled on a sandwich year.

Participants were also asked if they aspired for a future career in applied psychology (e.g., clinical or counselling psychology): 32% said 'Very Likely,' 35% said 'Likely', 24% said 'Unsure', and 5% said 'Unlikely' or 'Very Unlikely.'

### **2.3. Researcher and research context**

The study was conducted by two researcher/authors. One an academic with a background in clinical psychology who was initially supervising the other author, then an undergraduate student engaged in their final year dissertation and wanting to pursue a career in clinical psychology. Along with their links to clinical psychology, both were very interested in the area of critical community psychology, the perceptions of it in the UK undergraduate community, and its potential influence on current and future clinical and counselling psychologists and applied psychology generally.

In terms of positionality, a clear insider/outsider distinction may not be appropriate (Merriam et al., 2001). For example: i. the researchers are themselves in different positions; ii. there is not necessarily a single, large critical community psychology community within the UK to be insiders of; iii. and even more confoundingly, as illustrated by the items used in Thompson (2007), talking about critical community psychology often invokes aspects of community psychology and indeed even clinical and counselling psychology. However, as an academic and student working within a psychology department in an UK Higher Education (HE) institution: both researchers/authors were embedded in different parts of the UK HE ecosystem. To provide a little more context on the host institution itself: it is an English post-92 university with a large psychology department. Despite several staff having research interests in community / critical community psychology which influence their teaching – no psychology undergraduate modules or programmes contain the words community or community psychology.

The authors adopt a critical realist ontology and contextualist epistemology (Braun & Clarke, 2013). They chose to deliberately echo Thompson (2007) in the construction of this research, utilising a mixed methods format and wanting to gather data from a relatively large number of participants: this time undergraduates. Collecting data in this way, via an online survey, allowed participants to respond in their own time, without undue influence of the authors. At the same time, acknowledging that it was the authors themselves who designed the online survey this will, of course, influence participant responses.

### 3. Results

First the quantitative and then the qualitative results will be presented below. The quantitative results present descriptive statistics, tests for significant differences and correlations across the factor scores. The qualitative results first visually and then using illustrative quotes map out the themes within the comments from participants.

#### 3.1 Quantitative results

The quantitative data was analysed using SPSS. We used the factor names and structures from Thompson (2007) to shape these quantitative results (see Methods). As in Thompson (2007), Likert data is used as an ordinal approximation of continuous variables (see: Johnson & Creech, 1983; Norman, 2010; Sullivan & Artino, 2013; Zumbo & Zimmerman, 1993). To allow for a more direct comparison of mean scores across factors, the total score for each factor is divided by the number of items in that factor.

Descriptive statistics are shown in Table 1 below. Recalling that items fall on a scale from 1 (very relevant) to 5 (very irrelevant), Table 1 suggests a positive skew for several factors, which was confirmed by visual inspection of the distributions. As a result, median data is also provided in Table 1, and non-parametric statistics and bootstrapped correlations will be used for comparisons between factors.

**Table 1. Mean, Standard deviation and Median data for the four factor scores**

Reflective practice	Acknowledging and understanding	Core socio-political ideas	Radical socio-political ideas
1.76 (0.49) 1.70	1.81 (0.60) 1.83	2.03 (0.62) 2.00	2.23 (0.65) 2.14

*Note.* Sample size n=239. Data type in order: mean, (standard deviation), median.

The data in table 1 suggests that of the four factors, Reflective practice was seen as the most relevant, followed by Acknowledging and understanding, then Core socio-political ideas and finally Radical socio-political ideas.

**Table 2. Details of the pairwise comparisons between the four factors**

Pairwise comparison	Test stat	Std. test stat	Sig.	r
Reflective practice – Acknowledging and understanding	-.13	-1.13	1.00	-0.05, -
Reflective practice – Core socio-political ideas	-.73	-6.15	<.001	-0.28, S
Reflective practice – Radical socio-political ideas	-1.37	-11.57	<.001	-0.53, L
Acknowledging and understanding – Core socio-political ideas	.59	5.01	<.001	0.23, S
Acknowledging and understanding – Radical socio-political ideas	1.23	10.43	<.001	0.48, M
Core socio-political ideas – Radical socio-political ideas	-.64	-5.42	<.001	-0.25, S

*Note:* Test stat = Test statistic, Std test stat = Standardised test statistic, Sig = Significance, r = effect size, 0.1 – <0.3 (“S”, small), 0.3 – <0.5 (“M”, medium) and >=0.5 (“L”, large)). Std. Error for all combinations = .118.

But are these differences seen in Table 1 significant and meaningful? To examine this question, the four factor scores were entered into a Friedmans ANOVA. The results suggest

they are different from each other ( $\chi^2(3)=176.79$ ,  $p<.001$ ). Moreover, subsequent Wilcoxon signed-rank tests indicated significant differences across most pairwise comparisons with some differences in effect size (i.e., 1 non-significant relationship, 3 small, 2 medium and 1 large effect size, see Table 2).

Finally in terms of the quantitative data, Table 3 shows the bootstrapped Pearson's correlations ( $r$ ) between the four factors. All correlations were found to be significant, positive and large ( $>.5$ ) in size (Cohen, 1992). The implications of all of the quantitative results will be discussed further in the discussion when they will also be combined with the qualitative data.

**Table 3. Bootstrapped Pearson's correlations between the four factor scores**

	Reflective practice	Acknowledging and understanding	Core socio-political ideas
Acknowledging and understanding	.73 (.63 – .80)	-	-
Core socio-political ideas	.58 (.47 – .69)	.68 (.56 – .79)	-
Radical socio-political ideas	.59 (.47 – .69)	.63 (.52 – .73)	.80 (.74 – .85)

Note. Sample size  $n=239$ . All correlations at  $<.001$ . Bootstrap = 1000 samples.

### 3.2 Qualitative results

Following Jackson (2000, p.248-9) and Guest et al. (2012), the methods section has already been explicit about the exact questions participants were asked which prompted the qualitative data. The dataset was analysed using inductive, semantic Thematic Analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006; TA). TA, as originally described, is flexible in terms of approach, theory and epistemology. Braun and Clarke (2006) describe six phases of TA (transcribing the data, becoming familiar with the data; initial coding, searching for themes, reviewing and refining themes; reporting the analysis). These stages were generally followed, although it is important to acknowledge that no transcription was needed as participants typed in their own answers into the online survey. As a result, different to traditional interviews or focus groups, this study produced shorter, thinner data from a larger number of participants.

Echoing Thompson (2007), the researchers deliberately chose to analyse the qualitative data inductively – being led by information provided to us by participants – rather than imposing any pre-existing framework. That said, we also acknowledge that the active influence of researchers is not and cannot be removed. Microsoft Excel was used to help analyse the data, recording the researchers coding process and the development of themes overtime. Both authors contributed to the coding, sharing numbered versions of the Excel dataset between each other providing a record of our changing codes/themes along with notes/memos to acknowledge and share our workings and evolving thinking.

Starting with a visual map of the qualitative results (Figure 1), followed by description of themes and illustrative quotes the next section explores the qualitative data. Numbers, where given, indicate the number of comments participants made about the different areas.

**General positive endorsement (22).** In terms of 'general positive endorsement', many participants comments (22) expressed broad support for the concepts values and ideas within the critical community psychology (CCP) statements. For example: *"I believe that critical community psychology is a positive movement towards a society with better health and*

wellbeing” and “Critical community psychology will be hopefully become the preferred method of treating mental health in the future”.

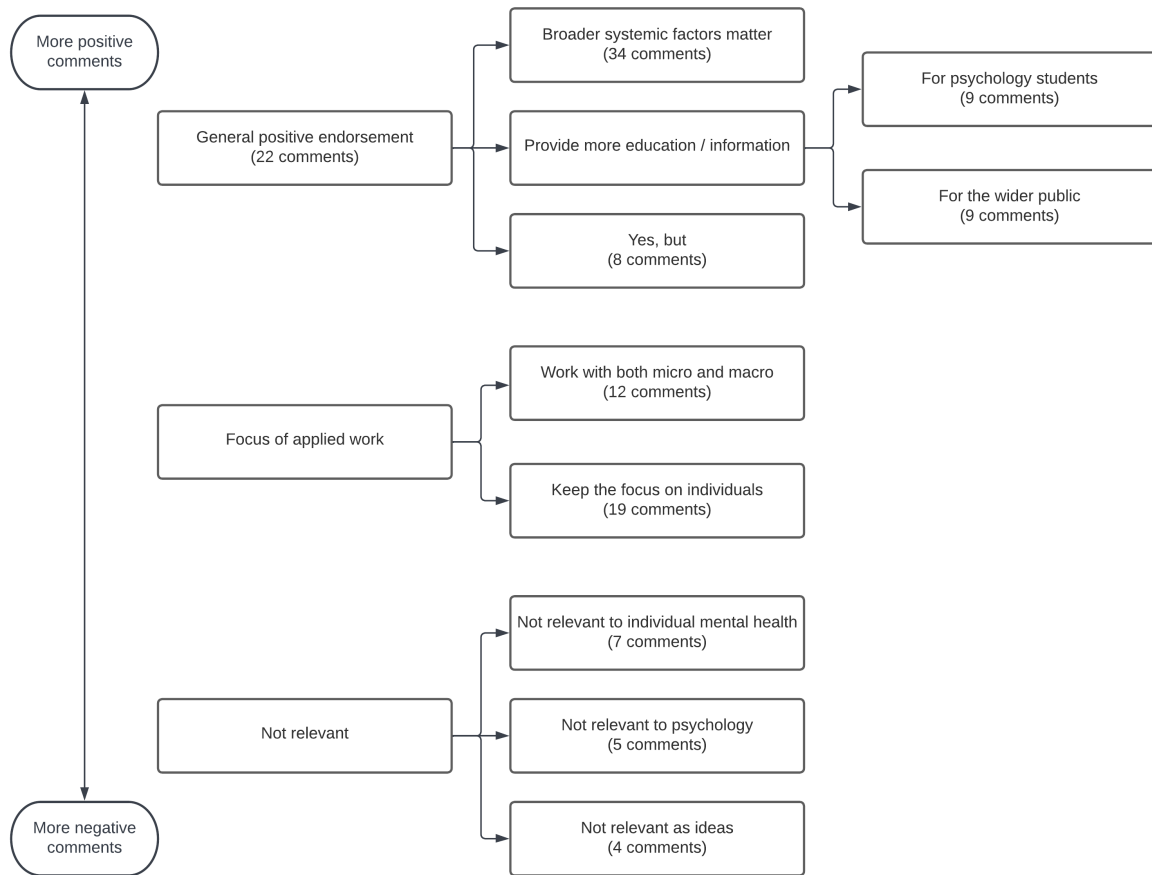


Figure 1. An overview of the results from the qualitative data

**Broader systemic factors (34).** Another positive, but more specific, set of comments (34) were given where participants endorsed the importance of broader systemic factors in terms of their impact on individual distress. For example:

*“I think that there are multiple factors that influence well-being and mental health and these need to be looked at more broadly. The social injustices that are within society influence on peoples well-being and mental health and I think psychologists have a duty to use [their] knowledge to help people on all levels. Working in mental health you can see influences of cuts that are making peoples lives harder so we need to change things on a bigger scale.”*

*“I think that in the future psychologists will begin to look at societies and communities as a whole, rather than taking a solely individualist perspective. I think that the current criteria will also be revised and people in the area of psychology will broaden their view on how people’s mental health and wellbeing is affected by the community and familial factors. They may even combine other disciplines such as politics to try and improve wellbeing on a national scale.”*



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**Provide more education/information.** Another category of positive comments revolved around two different types of education or information provision. Here participants acknowledged that they did not know a lot about CCP and wanting to know more (9). And also, participants thought that everyone, including those outside of academia, should know more about CCP (9).

**For psychology students (9).** Firstly, in terms of participants own education: *“I feel we need to do more work in first year on critical psychology, i remember touching on the topic briefly but i find it hard to incorporate this into my work and assignments”*. And also: *“It has raised some important issues within psychology as an undergrad student and I will [be] purchasing a book from amazon on critical community psychology in order to educate myself further”*.

**For the wider public (9).** But also, participants highlighted the importance of increasing everyone’s knowledge of CCP. Specifically: *“I feel critical community psychology helps those with mental health in regards to counselling psychology, however I believe the public need more information on this and not just the professionals.”*

Or, in more detail: *“I think critical community psychology is very important to help develop everyone understanding of psychology, linking to well-being and mental health. The more knowledge and understanding everyone has, the more we can all help each other and understand others better and therefore, understand the particular behaviours individuals may have due to the issue, and can help them.”*

**Yes, but (8).** In the last section of general positive endorsement, there were comments which, echoing Thompson (2007), are perhaps best described as ‘Yes, but’. Different participants personally endorsed CCP, but also wondering pragmatically whether things are possible or realistic. For example, the expense and time realising CCP, could involve:

*“In honesty, the vast majority of all the previous statements are hard to regard as unimportant. I think every statement, if achieved would lead to a far more just world and the improvements of millions of peoples lives however allocating resources to these types of things will be expensive and take lots of time. So we should identify the most important, in my opinion this is addressing suffering of the masses and also tackling the frequent oppression and discrimination within our society. Leading to improvements of the well-being of so many people.”*

Or, querying if a just world is realistic:

*“When answering questions about a “just world”, I struggled as I’m not entirely sure this is possible and the way that this can be realistically achieved. I do think it’s important to acknowledge that some aspects of mental distress are caused by a way of life that we accept as normal, but is actually very unnatural.”*

**Focus of applied work.** In addition to the focus earlier on the importance of broader systemic factors, there was a further section of comments dealing with the focus of applied work as a result of considering the CCP statements. One set of comments noted that working with both the micro and macro was important (12), but another, slightly larger set, thought the focus should remain on individual work (19).

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**Work with both the micro and macro (12).** Some participants noted the importance of including broader systemic ideas in applied work, while at the same time not letting go of individually focused ideas. For example: *“I feel many mental distress cases can be traced back to social factors but i also feel it is important to recognise that some cases may not have any social factors behind them and that some patients may experience mental [health issues] for other reasons and this possibility should not be over looked”*. Or, succinctly: *“I believe it’s important to address both individual issues and issues within society.”*

**Keep the focus on individuals (19).** However, moving a little further along the continuum of positive to negative, a larger category suggested that the priority should be to focus on individuals and individual treatment. Perhaps suggesting that broader issues and a broader focus are less of concern for psychology. For example: *“I think psychology should still focus on the individual (whilst other fields like sociology might address broader levels). However, psychologists should aim to acknowledge and understand how the broader contextual issues impact on the individual beyond their internal issues.”*

Or even more strongly, there might be a risk that moving beyond the individual might damage psychology: *“As an older undergraduate psychology student, I am under the impression that my goals as a future psychologist should be to aid those individually, but also to stay relatively clear of political issues that may influence or indoctrinate me and cause me to eventually be a detriment to the field. Some of the statements alluded to psychology branching out into these areas rather than the focus [on] the individuals behaviour. I feel that once psychology is influenced by politics and social norms/expectations, it becomes trivialised and diluted.”*

**Not relevant.** An even greater level of concern was expressed in a set of comments where participants felt that the material related to CCP, in part or as a whole was not relevant. Either not relevant to individual mental health (7), or not relevant to psychology (5) or finally, and strongest of all, not relevant as ideas (4).

**Not relevant to individual mental health (7).** Firstly, in terms of these ideas not being relevant to individual mental health: *“I did not know that community psychology was a thing but I see it as doing research and trying to understand situations for the purpose of benefitting groups in society. I don't see it having, much of a relationship to well-being or mental health.”*

**Not relevant to psychology (5).** Secondly, some participants commented that these ideas were not thought to be relevant to psychology more generally.

*“I felt that a lot of the statements had little relevance to psychology, as i know it. However, the questions which asked about mental health were good, but there could have been more, rather than the environment and other such things which although are very important, have little relevance to psychology imo [in my opinion].”*

*“I believe that we don't need to challenge the government, I think that this is out of a psychologist’s control. they can provide research to go against something but they can't directly challenge the government.”*

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**Not relevant as ideas (4).** A final set of comments added to this disquiet even further by challenging the relevance or validity of certain key ideas within CCP (e.g., social justice or oppression). For example: *"I do not agree with the underlying paradigm that's being suggested that systemic oppression exists nor that it is somehow prevalent. It is not the job of academics to force a political narrative."* And finally:

*"Some of the statements assume you believe that there is social injustice or oppression of certain groups (presumably based on sex or race), but if you don't believe these things are factual then it becomes difficult to say they are relevant or irrelevant as they don't exist."*

#### **4. Discussion**

As representatives of the future of the applied profession, this study explored UK psychology undergraduates' views of critical community psychology in terms of its relevance to the future of applied psychology related to well-being and mental health as participants understood it. Using the work of Thompson (2007) as its foundation, it gathered data from 239 participants.

The study was mixed methods, gathering first quantitative and then qualitative data. In terms of the quantitative data, each of the four factors: i. Reflective practice, ii. Acknowledging and understanding, iii. Core socio-political ideas, and iv. Radical socio-political ideas were significantly and positively related to each other. The strongest relationships were found between Radical socio-political and Core socio-political ideas (.80). The smallest relationships were found between the same two factors and Reflective practice (.58 and .59). But even in these latter cases, the relationships remained significant, positive and of a large effect size.

Measured on a scale of 1=very relevant, 3=neither relevant nor irrelevant, 5= very irrelevant, the four mean factor scores sat within a range of 1.76 to 2.23. Suggesting that participants, on average, considered all four factors relevant to the future of applied psychology related to well-being and mental health as they saw it. Even the mean factor scores for Radical socio-political ideas (2.23) sat more towards "relevant" (2) than "neither relevant nor irrelevant" (3). That said, significant differences between factors scores were found, with a large effect size between Radical socio-political ideas and Reflective practice ( $r=-.53$ ), and a medium effect size between Radical socio-political ideas and Acknowledging and understanding ( $r=.48$ ). Together the quantitative data, suggests a consistent pattern. Specifically, a series of strongly, positively correlated factors, which still have room for differences between them. While all factors are rated positively, there are meaningful differences (i.e., medium and large effect sizes) between the scores on the Radical socio-political ideas factor and the scores on both the Reflective practice and Acknowledging and understanding factors.

The quantitative data is echoed in the qualitative data. Many qualitative comments made by participants provide a general positive endorsement of the concepts, values and ideas of critical community psychology and the standpoint that broader systemic factors both matter and should influence how applied work related to well-being and mental health takes place.

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Indeed, these were the two biggest themes in the data in terms of number of comments made.

However, the next two biggest themes, in terms of comments made, become more nuanced. The first suggesting that applied work should include both micro and macro elements, the next noting that the focus of applied work should remain focused on the individual. Here perhaps, is additional supportive evidence for the quantitative findings that found participants prioritized the Reflective practice and Acknowledging and understanding factors. Both the two most positively rated factors, and the two factors which could more easily take place within a traditional therapeutic environment. With this in mind, it is important to note, that these two factors are also the two least radical, and if there was a continuum with clinical or counselling psychology practice on one end, which passed through community psychology, and ended at critical community psychology – it is arguable that the items in these two factors could be part of many versions of contemporary clinical or counselling psychology practice.

Although smaller, in terms of the number of comments made, there was also a notable number of more negative comments suggesting that statements related to critical community psychology were not relevant to: i. individual mental health, ii. to psychology, and even iii. that they were not relevant as ideas. We will return to these findings in more detail later but, for now, this information helps to provide context for the relatively lower scores for Core socio-political and Radical socio-political ideas. Specifically, because at least some participants appear to disagree, to different levels, with the validity of ideas from critical community psychology and even social justice and oppression itself.

For completeness, in terms of the qualitative data, it is also worth noting: i. that participant comments called for more education and information on critical community psychology, both for psychology students and for the wider public. And ii., like Thompson (2007), some made positive endorsements of critical community psychology but wondered if and how it could come to pass (“yes, but”).

The two data sets seem to complement each other (Creamer, 2018; Tembo, 2014), with the qualitative data helping to shed light on why the quantitative data produced the findings that it did. Despite generally positive responses, there are comments suggesting that applied psychology should continue to focus on and work with the individual alone, with a smaller subset rejecting the relevance of critical community psychology in a variety of ways. This, in all likelihood, helps explain higher ratings for Reflective practice and Acknowledging and understanding factors and lower ratings for the two factors which describe both Core and more Radical socio-political ideas.

Relating these findings back to Thompson (2007) which gathered data from trainee clinical psychologists. First of all, it must be noted that the 2007 study did not provide mean factor scores, so direct comparisons are not possible. However, scores for the highest and lowest rated items in the four factors were reported. These provide grounds for indirect comparison (see Table 4).

Noting the limitations of Table 4, in many ways, the broad pattern of results between the two studies seems similar. In terms of factor scores, the factor order in the current study seems the same as the 2007 study. Perhaps, and this makes some assumptions about results not directly reported in the original study, Reflective practice and Acknowledging and understanding were scored a little more positively by trainees and Radical socio-political ideas a little less so (see Table 4).

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**Table 4. Comparing quantitative results between Thompson (2007) and this study**

	Thompson (2007). Item range [score & (sd)]	This study. Factor scores [mean & (sd)]
Reflective practice	1.25 – 1.49 (0.64 – 0.82)	1.76 (0.49)
Acknowledging and understanding	1.42 – 1.82 (0.69 – 0.87)	1.81 (0.60)
Core socio-political ideas	1.50 – 2.64 (0.83 – 1.02)	2.03 (0.62)
Radical socio-political ideas	2.13 – 3.07 (0.90 – 1.11)	2.23 (0.65)

This might make sense. Firstly, different to undergraduates, UK trainee clinical psychologists (the 2007 sample) will have likely spent several years working to get onto clinical training. They will have more experience of the realities of doing individual work within the health and care system in the UK. This may have positively accentuated their rating of factors which are closer to current therapeutic practice, and may have made more radical ideas appear slightly less relevant. Secondly, while they represent the current future of the applied professions, not all undergraduates want to become clinical or counselling psychologists and even those who do may currently have incomplete knowledge of it.

On this topic, it is worth noting the percentage of participants contributing data who wanted to pursue a career in applied psychology related to well-being and mental health. Sixty-seven percent of the sample felt they were very likely or likely to do this. This is a high percentage of the sample, and it may reflect a selection bias, with those keen to pursue a career in well-being and mental health more likely to take part in the study. It also seems likely that the career they imagine for themselves has been built around traditional individual or group delivery, so it is heartening that they still score both Core and Radical socio-political ideas so highly. The question of course, is how, if at all, can core and radical socio-political ideas be enacted in the workplace in both their imagined career and reality? Do we dream about moving towards transformation, but end up working at the level of amelioration and as such risk accidentally serving the social forces that preserve the status quo (i.e., co-optation; see Prilleltensky, 2014).

It is worth noting that recent research has explored this tension by studying qualified UK clinical psychologists with interests in community / critical community psychology (Thompson et al., 2022). It found some participants describing difficulty in breaking out of traditional models of therapeutic delivery. Participants did describe examples of bringing community or critical community psychology ideas into their work. But these examples included: context-driven formulation, reducing power imbalances and facilitating group work. The discussion noted that these examples might also, simply, be illustrations of good contemporary clinical practice. These instances seem to be neatly captured by the Reflective practice factor in this study. Perhaps illustrating an interesting overlap in the Venn diagram between critical community psychology on one hand and contemporary clinical or counselling psychology on the other. While the Reflective practice factor was seen as the most relevant in this study, the statements it contains (see appendix 1) are also perhaps the furthest from bringing about transformative social change.

The same paper (Thompson et al., 2022) also explored how participants relationship with community or critical community psychology developed over time (see also Browne et al., 2020). It described the interplay of chronological life experiences and wider principles and politics. In places it highlighted the role of undergraduate education with some participants saying they were exposed to the ideas of CCP during their studies and others saying they felt that something was missing from their psychology degree programmes. This seems to

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highlight the potentially important role for providing more education about critical community psychology ideas at undergraduate level. This directly mirrors some of the qualitative responses in this study where it was noted that participants asked not just for more information for themselves, but also for the wider public outside of the academy. This, in itself, echoes two things from the statements describing critical community psychology. First, the key potential of critical consciousness, conscientization, or conscientização popularised by Freire (1970/1996; 1974/2005; statement 25) and found in both critical community (Angelique & Kyle, 2002) and liberation psychology (Martín-Baró, 1996). And secondly the importance of giving psychology away, by sharing psychological knowledge with others (statement 20). However, Burton et al. (2007) has already noted the limited flexibility in terms of the undergraduate curriculum as a result of the British Psychological Society (BPS). One interesting thought in terms of giving knowledge away to the wider public, is where that transfer takes place? Does it happen within traditional one-to-one or group therapeutic encounters? Or does it take place in a more transformative, more prevention-focused, more liberatory approaches where the knowledge becomes more present in society generally such that the need for traditional therapy is hopefully reduced.

While it is useful to highlight the potential role of education around critical community psychology / liberation psychology inside and outside of the academy, it needs to be acknowledged that other forms of education appear to already be impacting the views of two subsets of participants. Firstly, some participants commented on the potential damage to psychology as a field or science if it moved towards more political issues. This standpoint is one many critical or critical community psychologists would likely want to discuss. Secondly, a small but notable number of qualitative comments were even more critical of the content of some of the statements saying there were not relevant to individual mental health, to psychology, and - on occasion - not even relevant as ideas. Here, at the more extreme end, even ideas of social justice and oppression were questioned.

It seems important to acknowledge the possible influence of what some have termed the “Intellectual Dark Web” (IDW: Finlayson, 2021; Mannella, 2020; Parks, 2020), and in relation to psychology the likely influence of clinical psychologist Jordan Peterson (2019, 2021). The IDW has been described as promoting binary approaches to complex issues and an aversion to acknowledging, examining and intervening in exactly the issues that critical community psychology cares about (Finlayson, 2021; Mannella, 2020). As Parks notes, the leaders of the IDW have “a substantial influence on the development of the political and social identities of many people” (p.186). Perhaps it is not a surprise that some influenced in this way will take psychology undergraduate courses, especially as some of the leaders of the IDW are psychologists (see also Steven Pinker [Wesołowski, 2021]). Perhaps these students are coming to university expecting lectures and lecturers to reflect the views they have absorbed from the IDW and are then disappointed when this way of thinking is not reflected. Anecdotally, for a number of years, we have seen a small number of qualitative comments in our National Student Survey results (<https://www.thestudentsurvey.com/>) which seem to reflect this disappointment. At the very least, this seems to represent a challenge to those interested in promoting critical community psychology. It is not just that some students have not been exposed to the ideas of critical community psychology. Instead, due to other ideas and frameworks that they have absorbed, when some meet critical community psychology they can be negative towards these ideas at a fundamental, even existential, level. It is likely the case that in these situations individuals may need

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something more than “additional information” alone in order to start to view things differently.

In all the varied cases, described above, individual students and even colleagues may be unaware, that focusing solely on the individual, while ignoring wider social and structural issues, is a political choice, indeed even an ideological position (see Kidner, 2001; Martín-Baró, 1996). Such a focus may even be part of wider neoliberal pathways that lead individuals towards the IDW. And these concerns are much older than the rise of IDW itself. Even though some mainstream psychological research still appears to separate itself from socio-political context – both mainstream psychology as a subject area and the individual psychologists working within it do not exist in a vacuum. Context matters, and much of our work and its findings are political whether we choose to admit to it or not (Gergen, 1978; Kidner, 2001; Tajfel, 1979; Wilkinson, 1997).

Finally, at the end of "Toward a Liberation Psychology", Martín-Baró writes: "...a psychology of liberation requires a prior liberation of psychology..." (Martín-Baró, 1996, p.32). With the passage of time, some may ask how much closer critical community and liberation psychologists have got to bringing about this “prior liberation of psychology” as a whole? Recent work by community psychology authors based in the UK provide examples of both the global challenges we face (Kagan et al., 2022; Thompson et al., 2023) and how community psychology can seek to address them (Walker et al., 2022). Yet, psychology as a whole is vast and much of it has remained either unaware or unaltered by the call of Martín-Baró. They may also not become aware nor be swayed by the recent publications above, nor this one. At the same time, faced with these multiple environmental and wider social challenges, do we and are we able to change all of psychology first? Perhaps instead, critical community psychology and liberation psychology can continue to grow, not by seeking to change psychology as a whole – but by focusing on collaborating with those both inside and outside of academia who are committed to transforming the oppressions and challenges faced by people all over the planet, and the health of the planet itself.

#### **4.1 Limitations and future studies**

The items and factor structure used in Thompson (2007) and this study have only been through exploratory and not confirmatory factor analysis (CFA). The sample in this current study is arguably too small to confidently perform a CFA (Kline, 2011). As such, as the measure stands, it should not be considered a fully validated measure. This is something future research may wish to explore.

As noted in the discussion, the sample likely contained participants who were self-selecting so sensible caution should be taken before generalising any conclusions from it. However, it is also worth noting that some writers argue that different types of generalisations are possible, even from a single case study (see Simons, 2020).

Because this study used a single web address / URL to recruit participants, it is not possible to distinguish between the number of students who completed it from within the host institution and other institutions. Future research may choose to include a simple demographic question asking participants to select whether they attend the host or another UK institution.

It is important to note that there are many different qualitative positions and methodologies, even within thematic analysis. Different research teams, with different approaches, may have drawn different structures and conclusions from the same qualitative

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dataset. That said, the findings do seem to have some parallels to existing literature (see discussion above).

Future studies could further explore the validity of the items originally reported in Thompson (2007) and used in this study. Studies could also explore the perception of these items in other populations in the UK. For example, A' level psychology students, Masters psychology students, counselling psychology trainees, psychology academics. They could also be explored in other psychology focused contexts around Europe and the wider world acknowledging, of course, that items may need to be adapted from location to location. Other studies might also explore the extent of community and critical community psychology being taught or researched within HE institutions at both under and postgraduate levels, in the UK and elsewhere.

While the above are all potential natural extensions of this research, a more critical question could also be posed. There seems to be a balance to be struck between: i. studies which explore how different groups perceive critical community psychology and its current status quo and ii. studies which report on attempts to advance aspects of critical community psychology in the real world. Focusing on the second category may be of particular importance given both: i. the challenges we face (Kagan et al., 2022; Thompson et al., 2023) and ii. the possibility that the legitimacy of terms like social justice and oppression may be contested by a small number (undergraduates, or otherwise).

## **4.2 Conclusion**

With some exceptions, noted above, the results suggest that the UK psychology undergraduates sampled in this survey generally responded positively to statements around critical community psychology. This suggests and indeed some participants expressly asked for more information on this topic as part of their education. However, as noted in the introduction and the discussion, this comes against the backdrop of a BPS undergraduate curriculum that some argue is full, individually focused and with only limited space even for mental health under the remit of individual differences let alone community or critical community psychology. Moreover, within the UK there is currently only one Masters programme solely focused on community psychology and no set pathway to become a named “community psychologist” – let alone a critical community psychologist. So, despite participants expressing an interest in doing more transformative work – ways to both learn more about this subject and then move towards transformative change seem limited.

Indeed, while this research shows generally positive reactions to these statements from the next generation of applied psychologists, recent other research has suggested that even qualified applied professionals with an interest in critical community psychology can struggle to put these interests into practice beyond examples that already overlap with good clinical practice (e.g. Reflective practice, see Thompson et al., 2022). At the same time, examples of innovative practice do exist (Walker et al., 2022). Despite exemplars, a continuing challenge for many in the UK seems to be creating ways in which we all can move beyond positive perceptions and towards real world opportunities for transformative change where all four of the factors from this research can be not just valued but actioned in both research and praxis. In short, and as ever, much as many aspire for transformative social change, how do we bring it about in the real world?



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## Appendix

Statements and their corresponding factor make up and item order in this study.

Factor	Order	Statement
1. RP	2	Drawing on the skills, knowledge and expertise held by individuals and communities
1. RP	10	Working at the micro or personal level (i.e. with individuals)
1. RP	14	Recognising that professionals are not the only people who hold expertise
1. RP	22	Understanding problems from a community perspective
1. RP	27	Awareness, monitoring and management of the uses and abuses of power within therapeutic settings
1. RP	31	Understanding problems from an individual perspective
1. RP	32	Working at the meso or relational level (i.e. with families, schools, workplaces)
1. RP	41	Promoting "empowerment". This means a process by which people gain increasing control over their lives and circumstances
1. RP	42	Working collaboratively and forming partnerships with others. This means working "alongside of" not just "on behalf of"
1. RP	43	Challenging the dominance of medical / psychiatric conceptualisations of distress
2. A&U	3	Acknowledging and understanding the impact of sociological factors on suffering
2. A&U	9	Acknowledging and understanding the impact of cultural factors on suffering
2. A&U	13	Acknowledging and understanding the impact of religious / spiritual factors on suffering
2. A&U	21	Acknowledging and understanding the impact of economic factors on suffering
2. A&U	37	Acknowledging and understanding the impact of political factors on suffering
2. A&U	38	Acknowledging and understanding the impact of environmental factors on suffering
3. CSPI	4	Working with the poor, marginalised, oppressed and disadvantaged
3. CSPI	6	Working towards a just world
3. CSPI	11	Collaborating with other social movements who are working towards a just world
3. CSPI	15	Acknowledging that much human suffering is a result of social injustice
3. CSPI	18	Acknowledging that psychology's current position perpetuates social injustice
3. CSPI	34	Identifying and working against oppression in all its forms
3. CSPI	35	Acknowledging that psychology needs to do more to bring about a just world
4. RSPI	7	Challenging the purpose and prevalence of "globalisation" in contemporary society. This refers to a process by which the world has generally become more interconnected and big businesses have become more international and more powerful.
4. RSPI	16	Challenging the purpose and prevalence of capitalism in contemporary society
4. RSPI	23	Working outside of the "accommodationist paradigm". The accommodationist practice accepts injustice believing change is outside of its remit of legitimate work
4. RSPI	24	Promoting "social justice". Social justice is the fair and equitable allocation of bargaining power, resources, and burdens in society
4. RSPI	25	Aiding "conscientization" (1). This is where the oppressed develop an awareness and understanding of the nature of their oppressing circumstances
4. RSPI	36	Challenging governments and other institutions that perpetuate social injustice

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4. RSPI	40	Challenging the purpose and prevalence of individualism in contemporary society
Other	1	Promoting individual and collective resilience
Other	5	Reflecting on and responding to criticisms of psychology (in all its forms)
Other	8	Promoting "praxis". This means the integration of critical research, reflection and action. The combination of all three elements – not just researching without acting, or acting without reflecting
Other	12	Bringing a sense of social responsibility to psychology's work
Other	17	Awareness, monitoring and management of the uses and abuses of power outside of therapeutic settings
Other	19	Working at the macro or collective level (i.e. with communities and society)
Other	20	"Giving psychology away" by sharing psychological knowledge with others
Other	26	Aiding "conscientization" (2). This is where oppressors develop an awareness and understanding of how they contribute towards oppression
Other	28	Working towards "transformation" as opposed to "amelioration". This means trying to achieve more permanent and fundamental change than can be achieved by working with one person or one problem at a time
Other	29	Recognising the explicitly political nature of psychological work
Other	30	A focus on social and collective action as opposed to purely academic or philosophical discussion
Other	33	Understanding problems from a national perspective
Other	39	Understanding problems from a global perspective

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*Note.* Reflective practice (RP), Acknowledging and understanding (A&U), Core socio-political ideas (CSPI), Radical socio-political ideas (RSPI), Items not added to factors in Thompson (2007; Other).

All statements rated on a Likert-type scale: 1=Very relevant, 2= Relevant, 3=Neither relevant or irrelevant, 4=Irrelevant, 5=Very irrelevant.